

We think of Homer's *Iliad* as standing at the very beginning of Greek literature. But we know from the way in which it is written that it was the product of an oral epic tradition. Does Homer ever allude to what happened in other parts of that epic tradition? In this article Bruno Currie argues that scenes where characters weep should encourage us to look for an allusion.

At the beginning of the film *Run, Lola, Run* (Germany, 1999) Lola receives a desperate phone call from her boyfriend. Acting as a courier for a gang boss he has lost €100,000. Unless Lola can somehow procure the missing sum in twenty minutes, running across Berlin, he faces certain death. Not surprisingly it ends in tragedy. Twenty eventful minutes later Lola is lying on the ground, shot by a policeman. Then without explanation the clock goes back twenty minutes. Again we see Lola taking the phone call and setting off. This time it works out differently, but still ends in tragedy. This time it is the boyfriend lying dead, run over by an ambulance. The clock goes back a third time. But this time miracles happen. The boyfriend recovers his money and Lola wins the same amount in a casino. The gang boss gets paid, the couple stay alive, and they are €100,000 the richer.

*Run, Lola, Run* presents three parallel storylines, three mutually exclusive and logically incompatible alternatives. The curious thing is that at odd moments the characters appear, in defiance of logic, to have learned from their experience in a parallel version. In Version Two Lola knows how to cock a pistol, which she had to be told how to do in Version One. In Version Three she succeeds in side-stepping a dog on her staircase, which brought her to grief in Versions One and Two. In Version Three she arrives at the bank later than in the other two versions and the security guard asks her 'Here at last, pet?' His (and Lola's) facial expression as he says this reveals mystification at his own question. The question only makes sense if he knows what time she arrived in Versions One and Two, if *he* has experienced those versions, just as the audience has. But logically he cannot have experienced them. The film cleverly exploits these effects without troubling to explain how there can be three different versions of the same events, whether one version is more real than the others, or how a character's experience can be transferable

# Allusive tears in Homer's *Iliad*

Bruno Currie

from one (supposedly parallel, mutually exclusive) version to another.

## Homer and the epic tradition

Homer doesn't create parallel storylines quite like this. In an important sense he doesn't need to, as the parallel storylines are already there for him to exploit. A Greek audience of Homer's time, the eighth or seventh century B.C., will have heard countless times singers perform epic poems on the Trojan war. Today we still possess fragments of Greek epics close to Homer in date, such as the *Aethiopis* and *Little Iliad*. (The best place to read these is the volume *Greek Epic Fragments* in the Loeb Classical Library series.) Scholars argue about whether Homer and his audience knew some of the storylines contained in those epics and, if they did, whether Homer ever alludes to them. I believe he does, and I want to suggest there is – sometimes – a simple textual pointer to the fact that he is alluding: tears. Now, various characters weep at various points and for various reasons in Homer; I do not suppose that all tears point up an allusion. What I would consider 'allusive tears', however, have a peculiar quality. Like the guard's question in *Run, Lola, Run*, these tears seem to be motivated not so much by the situation the characters are *currently in* as by a situation they *have been in* in another version, one known to the audience from their experience of other epic poetry. Consider these three examples from Homer's *Iliad*.

## The tears of Andromache

In book six Hector briefly leaves the battlefield for the city of Troy and has an intimate and touching conversation with his wife, Andromache, and their infant son, Astyanax. Andromache weeps both at the start ('Andromache stood near by him, shedding tears') and at the end of this scene ('His dear wife went off home, turning round frequently, shedding abundant tears'). Why? On one level the tears are perfectly natural. Andromache fears the sack of Troy, the death of her husband, her own enslavement, their loss of their son. But comparison with a scene from the

*Little Iliad* suggests another dimension to Andromache's tears. That other poem narrates how at the sack of Troy the Greek Neoptolemus snatches Astyanax from his nurse's bosom and hurls him to his death from the walls of Troy; Andromache herself is led as a captive to his ship. These events are precisely what Andromache fears in *Iliad* book 6. The remarkable thing is that Homer's scene evokes this scene of the *Little Iliad* in some detail. In Homer, Hector is fully armed, and superficially he is indistinguishable from a hostile Greek warrior – Neoptolemus, say (little wonder that the baby Astyanax recoils from him in fright). Andromache and Hector meet on the city wall, the very place from where Neoptolemus hurls Astyanax to his death. And the nurse too is there, holding Astyanax at her bosom. For an audience who already knows the storyline contained in the *Little Iliad*, Andromache's tearful forebodings are more warranted than she can possibly realize. The audience has seen her and Astyanax in virtually the same scene before, in another epic; and Homer reminds us of that scene. What Andromache fears and weeps for the audience knows will happen. Or one could put it like this: Homer has permitted Andromache a faint, logic-defying, recollection of the fate that she, as a character in other epic poetry, has undergone countless times before. Compare the guard's question in *Run, Lola, Run*. The tears point up the allusion.

## The tears of Antilochus

At the end of book seventeen of the *Iliad* news of Patroclus' death at Hector's hands finally reaches Antilochus fighting on the edge of the battlefield. Receiving the news Antilochus weeps:

*Antilochus detested the news; for a long time speechlessness gripped him and his eyes filled with tears.*

Why? Many Greeks learn of Patroclus' death earlier in the same book, none react like this. We can easily invent explanations: that the young Antilochus is particularly tender-hearted, say, or that he was particularly close to Patroclus. But comparison with another epic poem, this

time the *Aethiopis*, gives Antilochus' tears another dimension. In the *Aethiopis* Antilochus is an important figure, who gets killed by Memnon (a hero fighting on the Trojan side); Achilles then kills Memnon in revenge and Achilles is in turn himself killed by Paris. Scholars have noticed how close this storyline is to Homer's *Iliad*, where Patroclus is killed by Hector, Achilles kills Hector in revenge, and Achilles will be killed by Paris. If, as many have supposed, Homer's audience was familiar with the storyline of the *Aethiopis*, Hector's killing Patroclus in the *Iliad* must have reminded them of Memnon killing Antilochus in that storyline. In that case, it is obvious why Patroclus' death touches Antilochus particularly closely. It is as if not merely the audience but the character himself is put in mind of his own death in a parallel version. Again, tears point up the allusion.

### The tears of Achilles

In book eighteen Achilles learns of Patroclus' death and grieves inconsolably. In answer to his cries his mother, Thetis, comes up to him from the sea-bed with her sisters, the Nereids. She weeps abundantly ('She wailed'; 'the Nereids went with her, tearful', 'grieving, she addressed him', 'Thetis addressed him, pouring down a tear'). Why? It is perhaps only natural for a mother to be upset when her only son loses his closest friend. But again comparison with the *Aethiopis* gives the tears another dimension. In that poem, after Achilles has been killed by Paris he is buried by the Greeks; and at his funeral Thetis and the Nereids come up from the sea to mourn him. The scene of *Iliad* book 18, though describing grief at the death Patroclus, evokes in detail Thetis' and the Nereids' grief at the funeral of Achilles. As many scholars have noted, when Thetis in book eighteen wails and takes her son's head in her hands she is in fact replicating a standard Greek funerary rite, described elsewhere in the *Iliad* and illustrated on contemporary vases. So, at the death of Patroclus, Homer makes Thetis grieve presciently for her own son; and the audience has already seen her, in another epic poem, shed these tears for real at her son's actual funeral. As Thetis is a prophetic goddess, it is less logic-defying with her than with Andromache or Antilochus that she should share this kind of foreknowledge with the audience.

Of course there are many instances where characters weep without alluding to anything. Homeric heroes and heroines weep freely (not like the repressed heroes and heroines of a Victorian novel). I am not suggesting that every time a character weeps we have an allusion to a parallel storyline. There are some very powerful scenes of weeping in the *Iliad*, such as Patroclus weeping 'like a young girl'

(book 16) or Achilles and Priam weeping together (book 24): these scenes are powerful in their own right, without alluding to anything. Nor do I think that every time Homer makes an allusion to a parallel storyline he necessarily marks it with allusive tears. Nevertheless, he marks allusions this way sufficiently often for us to be interested in the pattern and in its effects. The point is that the tears are perceived as being slightly incongruous with the situation. Not that the tears make no sense unless we suppose an allusion; just that it is very easy for us to think of another similar situation where the tears make more sense, where they are much more in place. Allusive tears are charged with special significance: they evince an excess of emotion that is not satisfactorily accounted for by the character's present situation, and it is that which prompts us to look for an allusion. We shouldn't think this too subtle for Homer, who likes the effect of a character weeping ostensibly for one thing, but really for another. Notice how Briseis and the other slave-girls weep over Patroclus in book 19:

*So she spoke, weeping; and the women added their lamentation, for Patroclus, ostensibly; but each for her own woes.*

*Bruno Currie teaches Classics at Oriel College, Oxford. His Pindar and the cult of heroes is published by OUP.*